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WEAPONS ELUDE CIA, BUT BACKERS CLAIM SUCCESSFUL COVERT ACTION

Backers of CIA covert activity in Nicaragua say the effort has successfully disrupted weapons shipments to Salvadoran guerrillas, but other officials say the 18-month mission has failed because no weapons have been seized.

The covert action, authorized by President Reagan in December 1981, initially involved supporting a 500-man force of Nicaraguan exiles to "interdict" arms shipments from the leftist Nicaraguan government to the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Noting that the force has grown to an estimated 10,000 men, critics contend the CIA operation has gone way beyond its original goal and now appears aimed at ousting the Sandinista government in Managua. The critics also question the effort's success at halting the arms flow.

"When we used to have our interdiction outside of Nicaragua, they (CIA officials) could show us what we were interdicting _ and it made sense," said Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., a critic on the Senate Intelligence Committee. "They'd show you how they'd captured these trucks.

"Now that they're inside the place, they can't show you what they're interdicting because I don't think they're interdicting anything _ maybe because they (the Nicaraguans) aren't shipping anything."

Several other officials, who spoke on condition they not be identified, said the CIA has been unable to present to congressional oversight committees evidence that the covert action has captured any weapon shipments.

One said that CIA director William J. Casey once told the House Intelligence Committee that the covert action had cut the weapons shipments by 60 percent, but he was immediately challenged to prove that claim and was unable to present hard evidence.

The House is considering a bill to cut off covert aid to the Nicaraguan exiles and replace it with an \$80 million open fund to help friendly governments stop leftist gun-running in the region.

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